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ELK KNOB PROJECT MOVES AHEAD

By CHARLIE PEEK
Public Information Officer

Efforts to place Elk Knob, one of Watauga County's highest peaks, into the parks system as a state natural area were successful on several fronts in recent weeks.

The NC General Assembly approved an additions bill that formally accepted Elk Knob as part of the system and thus eligible for grants from the Parks and Recreation Trust Fund.

In addition, the NC Natural Heritage Trust Fund approved a \$1.25 million grant toward the purchase of the 1,097-acre tract. The action brings that trust fund's total commitment to the project to \$2.25 million.

And on Sept. 3, the property was placed under the protective wing of the North Carolina chapter of The Nature Conservancy when it finalized purchase of the land from Sterling Carroll, a Watauga County businessman. The organization celebrated the acquisition in a Sept. 27 ceremony near the property. Its intention is to resell the \$4.2 million property to the parks system.

At that ceremony, Phil McKnelly, director of the NC Di-



DIVISION STAFFERS CONSIDER THE PANORAMA FROM ELK KNOB'S SUMMIT.

vision of Parks and Recreation, noted that the conservancy's North Carolina chapter is one of the strongest in the nation in preserving important lands and one of the most innovative.

"They've been a tremendous partner for us over time. This is just another example of their partnership," he said.

The Nature Conservancy moved quickly when it learned that Carroll would be willing to sell the property – a patchwork of small tracts he had acquired over the past two decades on the north-

west slopes of the mountain and ranging to the summit.

Beginning with the purchase of Bluff Mountain in Ashe County years ago, the conservancy has been interested in weaving a network of protected lands in a high-elevation range of amphibolite rock mountains that stretch through Watauga and Ashe. The nutrient-rich soils in the range often support rare plant species and communities.

At 5,520 feet, Elk Knob is the second-highest peak in

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Watauga and has been identified as one of the most important spots in the state for protection by a task force of the division. Its summit affords a view stretching from Mt. Rogers in Virginia to Roan Mountain and Mt. Mitchell to the south. It is located northeast of Boone off NC 194.

The mountain is drained by three creeks that form the headwaters of the North Fork of the New River. Six high-quality natural communities have been iden-

tified on the property as have three species of rare plants: trailing wolfsbane, Canada reed grass and meehania.

The mountain forms the southwestern boundary of Long Hope Valley, another high-priority preservation site identified by the division's task force.

The ceremony held by the conservancy was rain-soaked yet well attended by local residents, area legislators and members of the Appalachian State University

administration. The university operates a sustainable development outreach program. Staffers said that the preservation of Elk Knob contributes much to the preservation of the area's cultural heritage.

Carroll is using proceeds from the land sale, in part, to purchase a 30,000-acre ranch in Montana, which may be placed under conservation easements through that state's chapter of the conservancy.

"It's just a pleasure to know that this mountain will be preserved for Watauga County and our grandchildren," Carroll said

Katherine Skinner, executive director of the conservancy in North Carolina, noted that the state's trust funds for land conservation have been left untouched by legislators even in this year's budget crisis, and that improves prospects for preservation projects such as Elk Knob.

"With all the bad news coming out of Raleigh, that's the good news," she said.

The division will also seek a grant from the NC Clean Water Management Trust Fund.

From The Director's Desk

Dear fellow employees:

One North Carolina Naturally, the administration's new initiative to bring conservation back into the state's consciousness, is based on partnerships. We know that we can't look to government alone to achieve our goals of protecting and preserving important lands. It will take a like commitment by individuals, nonprofit organizations and local governments.

After attending a ceremony celebrating the purchase of Elk Knob in Watauga County by The Nature Conservancy, I'm convinced that the Division is out in front on this one. Indeed, the plan to bring Elk Knob into the state parks system – initially as a state natural area – could help to kickstart One North Carolina Naturally and become a model for how it's all supposed to work.

The division has a long and successful history with The Nature Conservancy and its staff. We know them to be innovative and tenacious. J. Merrill Lynch, the assistant director of protection, worked on the purchase of Elk Knob for three years and smoothed the way for some of our natural resource folks to document just how special the property is.

Merrill had help, in turn, from Tommy Walsh and other staff members of Appalachian State University's Sustainable Development Outreach program. A basic tenet of this program is that preserving the land goes a long way toward preserving the cultural heritage of a region. Tommy continues to spend many hours putting Merrill on the front porches of landowners and community leaders in the mountains.

The last important ingredient for success has been those Watauga County neighbors who've kept an open mind about the possibilities for preserving the high peaks. Their families have been stewards of that land for generations and they've taken that responsibility seriously.

Congratulations to all involved in this project. Our challenge in coming years will be to continue the excellent tradition of stewardship fostered by these neighbors, the university and The Nature Conservancy.

Sincerely,

Phil

Philip K. McKnelly

UP CLOSE AND PERSONNEL

Bryan K. Murray is the new Maintenance Mechanic II at Falls Lake State Recreation Area. Murray has been with the park for the past seven months as a seasonal mechanic.

Joel A. Valentine has been promoted to Maintenance Mechanic II at Kerr Lake State Recreation Area. Valentine has two years experience at Kerr Lake as a general utility worker and one year as a seasonal employee.

ADOPT-A-TRAIL READY FOR NEW APPLICANTS

Applications are now available for this year's Adopt-a-Trail grant funding cycle. The North Carolina Trails Committee will be awarding a total of \$103,680 through the grant program to government agencies, nonprofit organizations and private trail groups for trails projects.

The average amount awarded is \$3,000; the maximum awarded is \$5,000. No matching funds are required. Adopt-a-Trail grant funds can be used for trail building, trail signage and facilities, trail maintenance, trail brochures and maps, and other related uses. The deadline for submitting a grant application is November 27, 2002.

Applicants should review the grant scoring system on the application before applying. As the State Trails Program mission promotes linking systems of trails, projects that create a chain of linked trails are given a higher score.

Applications for funding may be obtained at www.ncsparks.net/trails.html or by contacting a regional trails specialist. Or, call the State Trails Program at (919) 846-9991 for more information.

AMEN CORNER

The following was sent recently to the staff at Hammocks Beach State Park. Heard any more kind words recently about our parks and staff? Send them along to The Steward.

Hello,

My wife and I visited Hammock's Beach State Park a couple weeks ago on August 22. We took the ferry ride to Bear Island and had a great time there searching for sand dollars and other things. While there I misplaced a set of keys and could not remember what I did with them or where I left them. Anyway after leaving my name and address at the desk and calling a few days later, I was told you had found them and that you would mail them to me. I want you to know I received them in the mail a few days ago and I am extremely grateful you took the time and effort to do that.

We had such a good time vacationing that week and one of the highlights was your state park. We hope to visit again next year and go hunting for sand dollars again. Thanks again for returning my keys!

Todd Davies

HIGH-ANGLE RESCUE TRAINING

RANGER MARK PRITCHARD RAPPELS DOWN MOUNT JEFFERSON AS THAT PARK'S STAFF CONDUCTS A TRAINING EXERCISE WITH THE ASHE COUNTY RESCUE SQUAD ON HIGH-ANGLE RESCUE. THE JULY TRAINING INCLUDED KNOT TYING AND THE HANDLING OF A STOKES BASKET WITH A 160-POUND MANNEQUIN.



LANDMARK TRAIL GETS A FACELIFT

By CHARLIE PEEK

Public Information Officer

Renovations have been completed on the Little Pinnacle Overlook Trail, one of the shortest and among the oldest and most heavily traveled footpaths in the state parks system.

The trail traverses about 100 yards from the summit parking lot of Pilot Mountain State Park to one of the best vantage points to view the signature pinnacle and was eroded knee-deep in places. It had become daunting for elderly visitors and a safety hazard.

The Unturned Stone of Mars Hill, contractor for the project, rebuilt the broad path carefully setting native stone to create an easier hike that still retains a “natural” feel. Unturned Stone recently completed a similar renovation project on the Hidden Falls/Window Falls trail at Hanging Rock State Park.

“It’s not symmetrically perfect. It’s not supposed to be. Few things in nature are,” Park Superintendent Andy Whitaker said. “But it’s very nice. The best thing is that it looks like it’s always been there.”

Indeed, the path seems to have always been there. It was used by local folks to view the pinnacle even before the property became a private park in 1929, popular with weekend visitors from the Triad area. Pilot Mountain State Park was created in 1968.

More than 400,000 people visit the park each year and for a majority of them, Little Pinnacle Overlook Trail is their first stop.

The trail was closed for



IT'S ONLY ABOUT 100 YARDS LONG, BUT THE LITTLE PINNACLE OVERLOOK TRAIL AT PILOT MOUNTAIN IS ONE OF THE PARK SYSTEM'S BUSIEST.

about one month during the renovation.

The project also involved rebuilding a system of handrails that keeps visitors away from the cliff faces of the smaller pinnacle. Whitaker said that the existing stone rail supports at the main viewing platform had worn out.

A new system ties handrails directly to steel columns that form the cores of new stone columns, he said, and makes for easy replacement of the wooden

handrails.

The \$54,945 project was funded through a trails maintenance program of the Parks and Recreation Trust Fund.

Contractors have also completed an upgrade of the half-mile Sassafras Trail using several truckloads of tailings from a South Carolina sandstone quarry to fill gullies and bring eroded sections up to grade. Similar work on the Jomeokee Trail is expected to begin soon.



NATIVE STONE WAS SET INTO PLACE TO GIVE THE TRAIL A 'NATURAL' FEEL.

TRAIL CELEBRATES WHAT YOU CAN'T SEE

By TAMARA WARD
Publications Coordinator

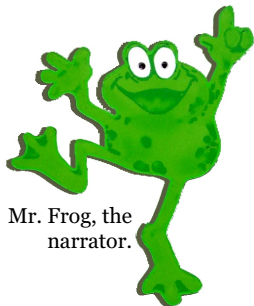
"You can't see it. You can't hear it. You can't even touch it. But you can't live without it. What is it? It's air!"

So reads a sign welcoming visitors to a station on the new Air Awareness Trail at Medoc Mountain State Park.

Along the quarter-mile trail that begins at the park office and meanders through sweet gums and oaks, loblolly pines and dogwoods, exhibit stations teach hikers about air quality and its importance. Funding for the trail came from a portion of a \$50,600 Mobile Source Emissions Reduction grant from the NC Division of Air Quality.

Grant money also is being used to purchase an electric golf cart and an interactive display about air quality, as well as to sponsor an air-quality field day at the park for area school-children.

"The whole idea was to make people more aware of the air quality," said Lyndon Sutton, superintendent at Medoc Mountain. "There's a lot of emphasis being placed on reduction of pollutants in the air. I feel like our main objective or philosophy is to try and educate the public."



Mr. Frog, the narrator.

Sutton said the trail was one way of introducing air issues to the public and educating them about ways they could lend a hand in reducing air pollution. Exhibit stations along the trail discuss Earth's atmosphere, global climate change, different types of ozone, how trees improve air quality, hazards caused by air pollution, and how park visitors can help prevent air pollution.

Tree markers are also placed along the trail, inviting hikers to examine the leaves to see how susceptible different types of trees are to air pollution.

The exhibit stations consist of colorful panels mounted on wooden posts. Some stations contain interactive features such as flip panels. Mr. Frog, a green cartoon narrator of the exhibits, appears on each panel. Each station is covered for protection from the elements. Tree labels are mounted on knee-high 4x4' posts.



DIVISION STAFFERS EXAMINE DISPLAYS IN A POST-CONSTRUCTION MEETING ON THE AIR AWARENESS TRAIL.

Siobhan O'Neal, exhibits coordinator, said that writing the text for the exhibit was a team effort. O'Neal, North District Interpretation and Education Specialist Lori Fleming, Medoc Mountain Park Ranger Carla Edwards, and Lead Interpretation and Education Specialist Marti Kane all contributed.

The exhibits were designed, manufactured and installed by Design Dimensions of Raleigh. As an Eagle Scout project, a local boy scout cleared the path and added gravel to the trail with the assistance of his father and brothers.

Sutton said that one of the benefits of having the trail begin at the park office is the convenience for visitors coming to the park office for programs.

"A lot of times, we may have something inside but may want to take people out on a short hike," said Sutton. "With the trail being where it's at, it is very accessible to take people on a hike and then come back to the office without having to load everybody up and go to a main trailhead."

The trail is scheduled to open to the public soon. Already, Sutton said, the park advisory committee members have walked the trail.

Sutton said he hopes to hold an air-quality field day by the end of this school year. He said the event will incorporate hikes, demonstrations and interpretive programs.

RANGERS REACHING MORE VISITORS

The state parks system reached 253,205 people through structured environmental education programs and events this year, according to a report released in September by Marti Kane, the division's lead interpretation and education specialist. The report reflects steady growth in this number over the past few years.

And, the parks system has seen a steady increase in numbers reached through spontaneous roving interpretation, which includes unscheduled interactions with visitors.

These could occur when a park ranger is hiking a trail, meets a park visitor and answers an environment-related question or initiates an environment-related discussion. Other interactions include short slide shows, talking with the public while manning exhibits and other instances where the interaction averages 10-15 minutes. This year, the division reached 220,602 people this way, up by more than 7,000 from the previous fiscal year and up more than 77,000 people from two years ago.

The park reaching the most people through structured environmental education programs was Goose Creek State Park, which held 927 programs and reached 17,265 people.

In a time of budget crunches and understaffing, Goose Creek Superintendent Scott Kershner said his rangers' willingness to go above and beyond duty allowed the park to reach so many people through environmental education efforts.

"They're fantastic," Kershner said of his staff. "This last year they have bent over backwards to change days off and do half days to help each other out when we have large groups. Without that flexibility and the personalities we have here, it wouldn't work."

Kershner said he has also used volunteers and staff from Pettigrew State Park. He said his district interpretation and education specialist, Helen Tenney, has also helped hold environmental programming at the park.

Goose Creek boasts the division's first environmental education center, complete with a computer-equipped resource room and a wet lab with microscopes and video projection equipment.

"The facility itself gives us the ability to do a wider range of programming than a traditional park," Kershner said

Students delve deeply into environmental

education at Goose Creek. Half- and full-day programs give them an in-depth look into the heart of the park. Students visit various stations to learn about different aspects of the park, from discovering the importance of wetlands and the hardwood swamp lifecycle to taking water samples and studying the microorganisms beneath microscopes.

Kershner said the park offers variety in its programming. "We allow the rangers to do whatever happens to be their thing," he said. "We just have a real good imaginative staff and they're able to come up with a variety of programs."

Some of the most popular programs include the park's guest speaker series, he said.

When the environmental education center at Goose Creek opened in 1998, the park sent flyers to local schools and across the state, inviting students and teachers to visit. Now, due to its increase in popularity, the park advertises to schools only when it is holding workshops for teachers. However, the park has such a good rapport with the local media that Kershner said hardly a month goes by when Goose Creek is not on the local paper's front page or on the local television station.

Other parks reaching large numbers of visitors through environmental education programming included Jockey's Ridge with 561 programs reaching 16,800 people, Lumber River with 10,242 visitors reached and Lake Waccamaw with 610 programs throughout the year.

The park that reached the most people through events that incorporated environmental education was Fort Macon, which held 307 events reaching 37,593 visitors. (However, due to the Department of Environment and Natural Resources counting method, if a ranger gives four of the same tours to different groups during the day, only one tour can be counted as an event).

Hanging Rock State Park held 13 events and totaled 6,540 people, and Kerr Lake State Recreation Area held five events and totaled 10,228 people. Morrow Mountain State Park held six events, reaching 4,270 people.

Gorges State Park reached more people – 42,358 – than any other state park through spontaneous roving interpretation, according to the report. Pilot Mountain State Park reached 19,327, Stone Mountain State Park reached 18,506, and Fort Macon reached 15,480 people in this category.

NORTH CAROLINA STATE PARKS MONTHLY ATTENDANCE REPORT AUGUST 2002

PARK	AUGUST 2002	TOTAL YTD AUG. 2002	AUGUST 2001	TOTAL YTD AUG. 2001	% CHANGE (2001/2002)	
					AUG.	YTD
CAROLINA BEACH	28,180	174,599	27,789	183,975	1%	-5%
CLIFFS OF THE NEUSE	16,554	104,577	14,468	97,864	14%	7%
CROWDER'S MOUNTAIN	18,431	204,448	26,773	185,615	-31%	10%
ENO RIVER	27,209	216,297	29,855	220,188	-9%	-2%
OCCONEECHEE MOUNTAIN	3,003	23,569	2,618	24,727	15%	-5%
FALLS LAKE	69,506	881,561	134,770	956,146	-48%	-8%
FORT FISHER	123,149	800,006	48,514	480,148	154%	67%
FORT MACON	159,590	1,033,280	136,428	949,056	17%	9%
GOOSE CREEK	10,646	100,262	10,316	81,108	3%	24%
GORGES	19,867	117,973	11,911	67,696	67%	74%
HAMMOCKS BEACH	18,423	140,137	25,800	143,512	-29%	-2%
HANGING ROCK	42,601	295,506	43,426	290,520	-2%	2%
JOCKEY'S RIDGE	153,370	766,948	164,125	785,283	-7%	-2%
JONES LAKE	14,924	79,760	10,886	94,586	37%	-16%
JORDAN LAKE	132,373	1,226,183	127,992	938,748	3%	31%
KERR LAKE	197,972	1,327,492	184,860	1,113,704	7%	19%
LAKE JAMES	26,124	214,284	27,474	200,195	-5%	7%
LAKE NORMAN	41,127	277,397	33,873	176,631	21%	57%
LAKE WACCAMAW	9,084	77,440	9,916	78,798	-8%	-2%
LUMBER RIVER	5,578	35,870	4,770	35,161	17%	2%
MEDOC MOUNTAIN	7,140	51,822	5,908	47,195	21%	10%
MERCHANT'S MILLPOND	7,681	66,445	6,087	60,098	26%	11%
MORROW MOUNTAIN	34,150	313,520	48,500	356,060	-30%	-12%
MOUNT JEFFERSON	11,878	66,214	10,412	61,333	14%	8%
MOUNT MITCHELL	88,019	385,406	63,644	336,693	38%	14%
NEW RIVER	19,516	112,651	17,877	91,168	9%	24%
PETTIGREW	8,465	58,653	7,419	65,787	14%	-11%
PILOT MOUNTAIN	38,052	267,550	41,727	276,525	-9%	-3%
RAVEN ROCK	9,348	79,505	9,038	81,191	3%	-2%
SINGLETARY LAKE	1,172	13,945	1,308	8,946	-10%	56%
SOUTH MOUNTAINS	12,194	115,781	15,154	135,202	-20%	-14%
STONE MOUNTAIN	45,968	315,943	48,284	342,186	-5%	-8%
WEYMOUTH WOODS	1,989	19,284	1,759	17,034	13%	13%
WILLIAM B. UMSTEAD	33,404	287,833	34,322	269,669	-3%	7%
SYSTEMWIDE TOTAL	1,436,687	10,252,141	1,388,003	9,252,748	4%	11%

HAPPY TRAILS IN THE STATE PARKS

With autumn just around the corner and temperatures cooling down, many Triangle residents are heading out of the suburbs and onto nearby trails. Joe Miller, outdoors writer for the News & Observer in Raleigh, recently published an article listing the 25 best fall hikes in and around the Triangle.

Miller divided the 25 hikes into five categories, including the best short and long hikes, the best family-friendly hikes, the best-kept secret hikes, and the best hikes within a day-trip of the Triangle.

North Carolina state parks in and near the Triangle ranked high and repeatedly on his lists. Although Miller had different criteria for each category within the 25 best, each trail did have one aspect in common: it was among the “most enjoyable trails to lose yourself on, figuratively speaking, on a crisp fall afternoon.”

In the category for the five best short hikes, two trails in state parks were listed. Buckquarter Creek Trail in Eno River State Park was listed for its interesting

ridgeline and waterfront scenery. Inspiration Trail in William B. Umstead State Park was also highlighted for its diverse vegetation.

State parks KO'd other public lands in the best long hikes category. With trails at Eno and Umstead, Raven Rock and Falls Lake, no other agency ranked in this category. Many of the state park trails mentioned passed by waterways and unique rock outcroppings and included challenging elevations. Miller compared the towering hardwoods along Eno River's Cox Mountain Trail to the majestic trees in the Joyce Kilmer Wilderness.

Although the best family-friendly hikes focused on relatively unchallenging trails – one even passed a playground – two state parks ranked in this category, including Sal's Branch Trail in Umstead. The trail was ranked for its proximity to the visitor's center, which includes interactive exhibits. Another trail ranking high for environmental education is in Clemmons State Educational Forest in Clayton.

The trail features “talking” trees and rocks that offer special insight into the forest's natural features.

The five best-kept secret hikes included three trails at state parks and one trail that connects with a state park. The trails were chosen for their lack of foot traffic but abundance of natural treasures including rock outcrops, meadows and unusual wildflowers. Eno's Cabe Lands Trail and Umstead's Loblolly Trail were among Miller's picks. Medoc Mountain State Park was highlighted for its interesting historical aspects and scenery, as well as for Bluff Loop Trail that features a scenic section above the park creek. The Falls Lake Trail section that travels through gamelands was also mentioned. Miller said that hunters were the only other people on the gamelands trail section that he had seen.

In the category for the best hikes within a day-trip of the Triangle, the trails at Hanging Rock State Park ranked higher than the Appalachian Trail, Uwharrie National Forest trails and Blue Ridge Parkway trails.

Mission

The mission of the North Carolina Division of Parks & Recreation is:



- to protect North Carolina's natural diversity;
- to provide and promote outdoor recreation opportunities throughout North Carolina;
- and
- to exemplify and encourage good stewardship of North Carolina's natural resources

for all citizens and visitors of North Carolina.

The Steward

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